

WHY WORDS MATTER: STATEMENT OF MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

As a teacher, I challenge my students to think critically about the words they use and help them learn how to improve their written and verbal rhetorical skills, empowering them to use language more effectively and persuasively. Over the course of my graduate study at Emory University, I have designed and taught courses on Caribbean literature, American literature, contemporary women novelists, poetry, and U.S. foreign policy. Although these topics might appear to have little, if anything, in common, my classes on them exhibited striking similarities because of their attention to language. Whether my students are writing about literature or analyzing current international events, I encourage them to think about why the words they use matter.

Creating an open, but challenging, classroom environment is essential for my style of rhetorical instruction. To foster this comfortable but rigorous classroom atmosphere, I set the tone for the course on the first day through class discussion in which I explain to the students the concrete objectives for the course. These objectives—regardless of the subject matter—include reading and analyzing texts attentively, constructing effective written and oral arguments, engaging in undergraduate-level research, and participating in meaningful critical discussions about the subject matter. After outlining my expectations for the course, I invite the students to tell me about their own goals for the class, and we discuss how we can shape our semester accordingly. I take the students' goals, which range from becoming more confident writers to learning how to properly cite sources, into account when planning my class lessons. Asking students to think about their investment in the class not only begins to instill a shared sense of responsibility for the course, but also helps create the academic community that students need to push each other critically and intellectually.

I have worked to foster such rhetorically minded academic environments and to challenge students to become better writers in the two general writing courses that I have taught at Emory—"Debating U.S. Foreign Policy," an expository writing class, and "Enacting the American Dream,"

an introduction to writing about literature. In both, I led class discussions that challenged students not only to think critically about the importance of the topics at hand—whether they be, for example, genocide in Darfur or depictions of the American dream in *Death of a Salesman*—but also about the significance of the words used to describe, address, or critique these topics. In the case of Darfur, we analyzed statements of world leaders and United Nations documents to compare how the language used to describe the situation heightened or downplayed the urgency of the problem. In addition to this type of classroom discussion, I used the students' paper-writing processes to help them understand why words matter—that the construction of their prose is important for communicating effectively and for making strong arguments. I organized peer-editing workshops and took the time to provide extensive, clear commentary on their papers that explained each paper's strengths and weaknesses while making suggestions for the next paper. Emphasizing that learning to write well is a lifelong process, not merely a means to a class grade, I sought to instill in students an attention to, if not a passion for, writing that will serve them well whatever their eventual career path may be.

My passion for teaching writing derives in part from my experience outside the classroom. Prior to graduate school, I wrote professionally for health care organizations. Although the content of my work was consistently medical, my audiences—which included cardiologists, oncologists, hospital administrators, and patients—greatly varied. When writing for such wide-ranging groups of people, the tone, diction, and style of my articles differed even if the subject matter was the same. This experience of writing to different audiences influences my teaching of writing. While helping students with their papers, I emphasize that the importance of developing appropriate tone and style for a particular audience extends beyond the classroom to a host of academic, professional, and interpersonal situations. I convey to my students that words that they use matter not only because the words communicate meaning, but also because they affect how the audience receives the intended message.

Beyond attention to basic writing fundamentals, I think that advanced literature courses should provide students with a rigorous engagement with language and more sophisticated critical and theoretical approaches to interpreting literary works. Emory's Dean's Teaching Fellowship, which is awarded for outstanding teaching, provided me with the opportunity to teach an upper-level course that examined Caribbean writers' revisions of canonical literature. In designing this class, I drew on both my academic and cultural experiences from studying at the University of the West Indies at Cave Hill, Barbados, in 2004 as well as on my dissertation research. The students and I created a "critical conversation" in the classroom that revolved around our own readings of the texts but that also responded to scholarship of prominent literary critics. Students learned to articulate their own critical approaches in collaborative paper workshops that give them an opportunity to read and comment on each other's work while gaining new insight into their own. Several of the students submitted their final papers to the Emory English Department's 2006-2007 Undergraduate Essay Competition, and one of my students won the contest for her paper entitled "Silence in the Canon and Its Caribbean Revisions." In their evaluations, students indicated that our critical conversations challenged them to think about both how and why Caribbean writers return to and adapt the most prominent works of English literature and more broadly about, as one student wrote, "the role of literature in the colonial experience." Stimulating this type of reflection is my goal for advanced students. I want them to think not only about the works of literature we read in class, but also about how reading and interpreting literature allows us to perceive the world differently.